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"A Great Way to Fly": Nationalism, the State, and the Varieties of Third-World Feminism

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Third-World feminism, by virtue of its vexed historical origins and complicated negotiations with contemporary state apparatuses, is necessarily a chimerical, hydra-headed creature, surviving in a plethora of lives and guises. In some countries, it may manifest itself as an organized national movement, complete with networks and regional chapters. In other countries, it may exist only as a kind of hit-and-run guerilla feminism: a feminism, perhaps, that arises spontaneously around issue-centered activity, that organizes itself in small, temporary neighborhood groupings which may eschew or refuse the name of feminism; or a feminism which piggybacks on that ubiquitous institution of the Third World, the nongovernmental organization (NGO). Third-World feminisms do not have the luxury of predictability; and a feminist theory that would be global in its compass, as in its intentions, must expect to be surprised by the strategies, appearance, and forms of feminism that emerge and are effective in Third-World contexts. As Third-World feminists themselves realize only too well, the difficulty of discussing Third-World feminism arises in the first instance as a difficulty of identifying the concretions and forms of effectivity in the Third World that can be grasped as feminist.

Whatever the particular shape of the local manifestations, however, all Third-World feminisms contend, in differing equations, with three principal factors that condition their emergence and survival. First, Third-World feminism is haunted by its historical origins, which continue to overshadow its character and future prospects. Historically, almost without exception, feminism has arisen in the Third World in tandem with nationalist movements—whether in the form of anticolonial/anti-imperialist struggles,

national modernization and reform movements, or religious-nationalist/cultural-nationalist revivalisms. Feminism has coexisted with these movements in a complicated relationship of sympathy and support, mutual use and mutual cooperation, and unacknowledged contestatory tension. As Kumari Jayawardena's (1986) groundbreaking study of early feminisms in the Middle East, South, Southeast, and East Asia repeatedly attests, feminist movements in the Third World have almost always grown out of the same historical soil, and at a similar historical moment, as nationalism. However, because the contestatory nature of the relationship between feminism and nationalism remains underemphasized in scholarship on the subject, both at the historical origin of feminism and nationalism and today, the subtext of many an academic study on women and Third-World anti-imperialist struggle, national reform, or national liberation movements is also inadvertently the record of a triumphant nationalism that makes its gains and wins its accomplishments at the expense of a subordinated feminism.¹

It is a truism that nationalist movements have historically supported women's issues as part of a process of social inclusion, in order to yoke the mass energy of as many community groups as possible to the nationalist cause (Anderson 1983). I would emphasize, however, that nationalist movements make common cause with women's issues and feminism equally because nationalism requires a certain self-representational vocabulary—a definitional apparatus to imagine and describe itself, to constitute itself ideologically, and to win an essential symbolic momentum. Throughout global history, with few exceptions, women, the feminine, and figures of gender, have traditionally anchored the nationalist imaginary—that undisclosed ideological matrix of nationalist culture. For example, at some point of their historical emergence, nations and nationalisms inevitably posit and naturalize a strategic set of relationships linking land, language, history, and people to produce a crucial nexus of pivotal terms—"motherland," "mother tongue," historical or traditional "mother culture," "founding fathers," etc.—that will hold together the affective conditions, the emotive core, of nationalist ideology and pull a collection of disparate peoples into a self-identified nation.² Women's issues do not only offer nationalist movements a vital social platform for the collective mobilization of multiple community groups. Female emancipation—a powerful political symbol describing at once a separation from the past, the aspirations of an activist present, and the utopia of an imagined national future—supplies a mechanism of self-description and self-projection of incalculably more than pragmatic value in the self-fashioning of nations and nationalisms.³

The manipulation of women's issues as an ideological and political resource in Third-World nationalist history commonly develops, in contemporary contexts, into the manipulation of women themselves as a socioeco-

economic resource in Third-World nation-states. While early Third-World feminism negotiated relations of mutual use and mutual contestation with early nationalism, contemporary Third-World feminism is forced to enter into and negotiate a more troubled, complex, and sometimes dangerous oppositional relationship to the contemporary Third-World state. The second factor, then, that impinges upon the character of feminism in the Third World is the presence, intervention, and role of the state itself. In contemporary Southeast Asia, the state, at its most benign, is a fiscal beneficiary of the exploitation of women, and, at its least benign, an active agent structuring the exploitation itself.

In Thailand and the Philippines, for instance, the state's GNP is bolstered substantially by prostitution, a growth industry that fuels the tourist trade, and sustains foreign exchange income. Thai NGOs estimate a growth figure of two million prostitutes by the year 2000, of which (with the intensifying fear of AIDS and the concomitant increased demand for virgins and children) as many as 800,000 would be children under fifteen years of age (Tan 1991). This spectacularly cynical form of female/child exploitation has perhaps been the most extensively studied of feminist issues: the critical nexus of state policy, foreign capital, banks, and the hotel-construction industry, that supports and encourages Thai prostitution, for example, has been cogently documented (Truong 1990). By contrast, the exportation of Filipino, Thai, Indonesian, Sri Lankan, and other female domestic workers to East Asian, Middle Eastern, and First-World destinations is only beginning to be studied. Yet, the Philippines exports 60,000 female domestic workers to Hong Kong alone, and reaps HK \$1 billion annually from remittances these workers send back ("Filipino Senator Calls for Ban"); in Singapore, there were 65,000 foreign domestic workers in 1992 (Heyzer and Wee 1992). Host countries, like the countries of origin of the domestic workers, also profit from the expropriation of female domestic labor that is commonly left outside the purview of protective employment legislation. Singapore, for example, extracts a maid "levy" from the employers of domestic workers (since April 1991, S\$300 per worker), a sum that is often greater than the wages the workers themselves earn. The Singapore government reaps S\$234 million annually from the maid levy (Heyzer and Wee 1992), and a massive S\$1.3 billion in 1992 from all foreign-worker levies ("Govt. Replies to MPs"). Malaysia expected to garner M\$80 million from levies on foreign workers in 1992 ("Govt. Likely to Collect \$48m"). More invisibly, but just as exploitatively, state-owned or state-affiliated airline industries throughout Southeast Asia (and South and East Asian countries) routinely sell the sexualized images and personal charm and services of their female flight attendants, in the highly competitive and highly profitable commercial air-travel market, through aggressive global marketing and media advertising, for the profit of the national coffers.

The forceful divergence of feminist and national interests in the Third World is further complicated by the looming and often interventionist role of the state as a regulatory, juridical, administrative, or military force in Third-World countries. Because governments in contemporary Southeast Asia exercise considerable control over public institutions and organizations within state boundaries, for instance, feminism often adapts by refusing to constitute feminist activity along formal lines. To evade state control, legislative interference, or other governmental regulatory activity, feminism in Southeast Asia has sometimes assumed the character of informal collectivities and local groups, existing humbly but usefully as small-scale feminisms.

A third factor mediating the adaptations and strategies of feminism in the Third World is the ambivalence of Third-World nations—and Third-World nationalism—to the advent of modernity. Perhaps because nationalism is itself of modern provenance or because the nation is a modern construct whose ideological bases must be continually renewed and secured, an attendant anxiety over modernity, particularly in the sociocultural register, is endemic in Third-World contexts. Even where a systemic transformation to modernity, in economic and social organization, is sought and implemented by nations and nationalisms in the Third World as a desideratum of development, a resistance to the totalizing implications of modernization is invariably sedimented at some juncture of the modernization process. Acceptance of modernity's incursions, then, comes to operate selectively: a division in the rhetoric of nationalist discourse appears, distinguishing between the technological and economic machinery of modernization (which can continue to be deemed useful, indeed, essential to the nation), and the cultural apparatus of modernization—the alarming detritus of modernity's social effects—which may be guarded against as contaminating, dangerous, and undesirable.⁴ Correlatively, in countries where modernization or reform follows the nation's emergence from Western colonial subjection, or where a resurgent religious traditionalism is the dominant mode of nationalist culture, nationalist antipathy to modernity's social impact may be expressed as antipathy to the West and to Western cultural modalities. The ease with which, historically, the "modern" and the "Western" have been conflated and offered as synonymous, interchangeable counters in both nationalist and Orientalist discourse has meant that a nationalist accusation of modern and/or foreign—that is to say, Western—provenance or influence, when directed at a social movement, has been sufficient for the movement's delegitimization.

Given feminism's uneasy status in the Third World, its problematic relations with nationalism, and (like nationalism) its relatively brief genealogy, Third-World feminism has been especially liable to manipulation by nationalists for its symbolizing potential, as a capsule instance of the encroachment of modernity and/or Westernization. Just as women's issues, female

emancipation, and feminism lend themselves to nationalist self-figuration at a given historical moment of nationalist formation, so do they lend themselves to the symptomatic figuration of nationalism's ambivalence to both modernity and the West. Antifeminist nationalists in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East, for instance, have historically represented feminism as the subversive figure, at once of a destabilizing modernity and of a presumptuous Western imperialism (Philipp 1978). Indeed, nationalism is so powerful a force in the Third World that to counter the charge of antinationalism—the assertion that feminism is of foreign origin and influence, and therefore implicitly or expressly antinational—the strategic response of a Third-World feminism under threat must be, and has sometimes been, to assume the nationalist mantle itself: seeking legitimation and ideological support in local cultural history, by finding feminist or protofeminist myths, laws, customs, characters, narratives, and origins in the national or communal past or in strategic interpretations of religious history or law. That is to say, through the glass of First-World feminisms, Third-World feminisms may appear to be willfully naïve, nativist, or essentialist in their ideological stakes: the requirement of an unexceptionable genealogy, history, or tradition for feminism must assume decisive priority.

In the section that follows, I track the vicissitudes and adaptations of feminism in one Southeast Asian country, focusing with particular, though not exclusive, emphasis on the postcolonial nation-state of Singapore.

A common denominator in the linked national histories of Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia is the appearance of feminism in dramatic concert with nationalism in anticolonial independence movements. Feminist women leaders arose who were also prominent nationalist political organizers; political parties on the left and the right articulated feminist goals in the anti-imperialist struggle, with the twin aims of mobilizing mass support and attaching to themselves a powerfully symbolic instrument of ideological self-description; women's groups were institutionalized that had formal affiliations to, or close informal ties with, national political parties; and, finally, all three countries witnessed the absorption of feminist leaders and feminist issues into political structures that dispersed and disengaged feminist interests in the postcolonial period.

In contrast to the history of feminism in Indonesia,⁵ where the first institutional women's movements began as independent partners of nationalist organizations to which they were not initially subordinated, feminism in Singapore and Malaysia arose as a subset of nationalist politics, so that the hierarchical relationship of feminism to nationalism—an asymmetry of tension and use—was plainly visible from the outset. The two principal factions contesting for national political power in the wake of British colonial administration in Singapore—a Communist faction, later grouped as the

Barisan Socialist, and social democrats organized as the People's Action Party, or PAP (which subsequently formed the postcolonial government that rules Singapore today)—both harnessed feminist issues to their national platforms. The first created a Singapore Women's Federation as a front organization for revolutionary activity, and the second sponsored a Women's League and women's subcommittees in 1956 under the direction of central PAP party leadership.⁶

By their own recorded account, the People's Action Party saw women's issues and feminist-activist women as a resource to be mined. A former Cabinet Minister notes in passing that "the Communists had recognized the potential of exploiting [the] injustice [suffered by women]" before the PAP had, "and were first in the field to organise women into their fold" (Ong 1979).⁷ Significantly, the theme of female emancipation enabled the essentially reform-minded PAP, whose leadership was dominated by English-educated male elites, to present itself in powerfully revolutionary terms, the ideological resonance of which echoed and approximated the revolutionary discourse of their competitors, the Chinese-educated and China-backed Communists, whose own impetus and direction issued from the revolutionary politics of the People's Republic of China. In a section of the party's 1959 manifesto, *The Tasks Ahead: PAP's Five-Year Plan 1959–1964*, which originally appeared as a pre-election campaign speech by the most prominent woman feminist leader in the party, Chan Choy Siong, the theme of female emancipation is presented ringingly, in a reverberative vision of the imagined nation-to-be as a feminist-socialist utopia within a section entitled "Women in the New Singapore": "In a full socialist society, for which the P.A.P. will work for [*sic*], all people will have equal rights and opportunities, irrespective of sex, race or religion. There is no place in a socialist society for the exploitation of women."⁸ The manifesto announces a feminist agenda in the declarative terms of social revolution:

We will encourage women to take an active part in politics. We will help them organise a unified women's movement to fight for women's rights. We will encourage women to play their proper part in Government administration. We will open up new avenues of employment for women. We will insist that the welfare of widows and orphans must be the responsibility of Government. We will insist that married women be given an opportunity to live a full life, including the right to work on level terms with others. Under the law maternity leave and allowances will be compulsory. The P.A.P. Government will establish more creches to look after children while mothers are at work. We will encourage factories employing large numbers of women to provide creches on factory sites. The present marriage laws which permit polygamy will be

amended. The P.A.P. believes that a necessary condition for a stable home and family is monogamous marriage . . . it is essential that women and their families should be protected against unscrupulous husbands who treat their wives as chattels and abandon their children and families without any thought for their future. (*The Tasks Ahead*)¹⁰

PAP and Communist women worked to advance feminist and party goals without distinguishing between these interests, within the overarching frame and under the orders of their institutional organizations. A PAP-authorized history of the party, published in 1979, baldly chronicles the cooptation of women's energies for party purposes in the simple language of use: "The Women's League was active in rallying women members and supporters to campaign for the PAP. . . . They were especially effective in house to house canvassing, cooking food for Party workers, distributing leaflets, and providing speakers at rallies. The women worked as hard as the men and their contribution to the success of the Party was visible to all" (Ong 1979). After the PAP successfully wrested power and constituted a national government, Chan Choy Siong was sidelined in the Party. Unlike her male compatriots and peers, she was never destined to achieve Cabinet rank. In a parliament of eighty-one elected representatives in Singapore in 1993, among seventy-seven PAP Members of Parliament, two are women.¹¹ Once the PAP assumed national control, Communist women activists—more difficult to track because of their self-protective anonymity and their subsequent dispersal—were either forcibly deported to China and exiled or politically rehabilitated by the new national government; some went underground, slipping away to join the proscribed Malayan Communist Party (MCP), to wage guerilla warfare against the postcolonial governments of Singapore and Malaysia.¹²

In Malaysia, as in Singapore, the first women's political movement, Angkatan Wanita Sedar (AWAS, or the Movement of Conscious Women), would seem to have been created at the instigation of a nationalist political party. In 1945, Parti Kebangsaan Melayu Malaya (the PKMM, or Malay Nationalist Party) founded AWAS, as much because women were needed by the party as "to arouse in Malay women the consciousness of equal rights they have with men, to free them from old bonds of tradition and to socialize them" (Dancz 1987). AWAS fell victim in the nationalist cause in 1948, proscribed by the British colonial administration.¹³ Typically, AWAS's core leadership of politically active women—Malay women politicized by an early radical Islamic education in Indonesia in the 1930s, under Indonesian teachers active in the nationalist struggle against the Dutch colonial administration—were absorbed into women's sections of national political parties or the Communist underground (Dancz 1987; Karim 1983). Aishah Ghani, the

first president of AWAS, became a member of the women's division of the United Malay Nationalist Organization (UMNO), the principal political party of the ruling National Front in postcolonial Malaysia, and eventually served as president of UMNO's second women's wing (Wanita UMNO) and Minister of Social Welfare in the Malaysian Cabinet. Sakinah Junid enlisted in the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PMIP)—now Parti Islam Se Malaya (PAS)—and later became president of Parti Islam's women's section, Dewan Muslimat; Samsiah Fakeh, the second president of AWAS, "continued her revolutionary struggles underground, working closely with the Malayan Communist Party" (Karim 1983).¹⁴

In Singapore, in 1961, the postindependence government formed by the People's Action Party passed legislation addressing the legal rights of women and children, in partial fulfillment of campaign pledges to feminist nationalists and female voters. This legislative document, known as the Women's Charter, synchronously enfranchised women and produced, effectively, a legal definition of feminine identity codified around marriage, divorce, and relationship to children, as much as it also ruled in other matters on women's status as individual citizens. The Charter, in effect, legislated a description of female identity by establishing legal responses to a wide-ranging set of presumptive questions (What is a woman? What does she need? What is the nature/what are the conditions of her sexuality? What is her place? What is the place of her relationships to others?). In thus specifying legal conditions pertaining specially to women and children—awarding, in that process, rights that were unquestionably vital, indeed, essential to women at the time—the Charter also enacted and codified a description of women as specially gendered subjects under the law, a sexualized codification directed specially to the state's female citizens.¹⁵ No comparable legislation exists that describes the configuration or borders of masculine identity under the law.

Historically, the enactment of the Women's Charter was simultaneously an enfranchising and a disenfranchising moment for feminists. After the establishment of the Charter, it was widely felt that there were "no more problems" confronting women,¹⁶ because the most urgent and dramatic inequities had been addressed. Men and women alike felt that Singaporean women, unlike women in other Third-World nations, had no need of feminism or a feminist movement, and until the 1980s, women's groups in Singapore assumed the form of recreational, athletic, or cultural clubs, charity or professional associations, and social work and community service organizations—a voluntary or involuntary playing-out, at the community level, of the authorized identities established for women under the law.

The production and legitimation of particular feminine identities—commonly an implicit, more than an explicit, process—is of enduring importance to contemporary Third-World states. A dramatic example is the (re)donning

of the *hijab* or veil by Muslim women in the Middle East, signalling the deployment of a traditional feminine identity as a powerfully symbolic icon of Islamic cultural nationalism.¹⁷ In Singapore, in 1983, the very survival of the nation was presented as hinging on the production of appropriate kinds of feminine identity when Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew raised the specter of a dystopian national future that would unfold if well-educated women willfully continued to refuse to marry and reproduce children in numbers adequate to the maintenance of class and racial elites (Heng and Devan 1992). States also profit from the manipulation of women and feminine identity as an economic resource: the production of a sexualized femininity as a commodity for negotiation and trading in the profitable, if competitive, air-travel-services market in Asia underscores the necessarily oppositional relationship between feminist interests and state-sponsored descriptions of the national interest in the contemporary Third World.¹⁸

Singapore, in particular, has exploited a sexualized Asian femininity to sell the services of its national air carrier, Singapore Airlines (SIA), with incomparably spectacular commercial success.¹⁹ So globally familiar is the airline's "Singapore Girl"—never a "woman," and certainly no mere "flight attendant," but "a great way to fly," as every male business traveler around the world knows—that Madame Tussaud's of London, when it "wanted to feature a figure from air travel" among its waxworks, "found the Singapore Girl to be the most recognizable air travel figure in the world today" (Lee 1993). That the image of the Singapore woman which the airline and the state sell on the air services market is a sexual one is readily attested to. Singapore law courts recently tried a rash of sexual-molestation cases, where male air passengers of varied descriptions, races, and national origins had apparently found it impossible to resist fondling or otherwise sexually handling stewardesses on SIA flights. Indeed, so successful at evocation is the soft-focus image of the "Singapore Girl" in her figure-hugging, Pierre Balmain-designed *sarong kebaya*, that a bar-cum-brothel in Thailand was reported to have clad its hostesses in copycat imitations of the SIA flight uniform (Tan 1991).²⁰

Singapore is not, however, unique among Third-World states in touting and marketing the serviceability of its women and a fantasmatic Asian femininity. A recent multipart feature in the *Asia Magazine* (16–18 August 1991) admiringly reports how Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia all exploit, with varying degrees of success, a calculated image of their female citizens to promote national airline industries. Playing to a fantasy of what Asian women are putatively like, the countries describe the romantic sexuality, exoticism, beauty, youth, and charm of their female flight attendants, and the women's innate, instinctual desire to please and serve. The phenomenon of trading in feminine identity is commonplace in Asia; any cursory survey of the advertising of other Asian carriers will disclose the extent to which

Third-World nations in the East casually sell the sexualized images and personal services of their female national subjects on the world market.²¹

That the legitimization of some feminine identities over others can be a matter of considerable national profit and national interest in the Third-World state is clear from this commercial equation. In Singapore, the proven and continuing success of the national carrier's advertising campaigns is propped upon an exploitation of the discourse of Orientalism, a Western discourse which the Eastern state rides in its flawless manipulation of a projected feminine image. In the course of that manipulation, an exemplary collusion is put in place between postcolonial state corporatism (SIA as a government-affiliated national carrier) and neocolonial Orientalist discourse on the serviceability and exoticism of the Asian woman: a collusion that produces, through the *technique* of transnational global advertising and marketing, a commercial enterprise generating substantial fiscal surpluses, and vindicated at the outset as nationalist. For the nationalist credentials of this particular project of antifeminist exploitation are never in doubt. Corporate and marketing executives of Singapore Airlines and the carrier's advertising agency, the Batey Group, when condescending to defend their marketing strategies to Singapore feminists, have instinctively tricked themselves out in nationalist drag.

More recently, the editor of the *Straits Times*, the country's principal English-language daily newspaper, insinuated a suggestion that attempts by Western nations to spread the values of liberal democracy, human rights, and civil liberties to developing nations may be driven, sinisterly, by a covert desire to weaken the economic competitiveness of the Third World. Festooning himself with the impeccable nationalist credentials of state-sponsored sexism, the editor smirked: "Younger Singaporeans should think hard before they lap up whatever is in vogue. . . . Is the Singapore Girl really a sexist symbol that ought to be replaced or would agitation on this issue erode Singapore Airlines' competitive edge? They would do well to remember that competition between nations can only hot up, and that losers will be left by the wayside." The accompanying cartoon illustrating the editor's contentions featured a set of posters on a barbed-wire fence representing the constitutive barrier of a Western checkpoint on the correctness of the political record of developing nations. One of the posters demands the presentation of a human-rights record; on another poster is emblazoned "Women's Rights Charter." Surreptitiously, the illustration and the newspaper columnist tap a reservoir of Third-World suspicion at the multifariousness of Western imperialisms, and clearly, feminism and human rights are here offered as imperialisms of the economically corrosive, objectionably vogueish kind.²²

By contrast, Malaysian feminists note the more explicit and direct depiction of feminism by Islamic nationalists in Malaysia as a pernicious species

of cultural infiltration—as a foreign, Western, and modern encroachment that symbolizes the many encroachments that have undermined Malay Muslim culture from the beginning of colonization:

The massive recruitments of Malaysian women into [the *dakwa* Islamic movement] is perceived . . . to be part of a re-education or resocialization process, whereby women can be rescued from the throes of Westernization that have permeated Malay culture from the beginning of colonialism to the present. . . These community movements are a powerful instrumental force in projecting feminism as a component of Western liberalism which has no niche in Eastern cultures. (Karim 727)

One feminist response to the imputation by Malay Islamic nationalists that feminism is Western, antitraditional, or secular in its origins and nature, has been to cite contemporary feminist Islamic exegetes on the Qu'rān who offer rereadings of that sacred text as authorizing the equality of men and women.²³ Another feminist strategy in Southeast Asia has also been to suggest a local genealogy for feminism, by pointing to notable women figures in communal or national history and folklore. In the Philippines, for instance, there were "pre-Spanish priestesses or *katalonans* . . . heroines of the Spanish revolution, the women leaders of the Japanese occupation" (Shahani 1975); in Vietnam, there were the feminist Ho Xuan Huong and folkloric resistance fighters like the Trung sisters and Trieu Thi Trinh, or Doan Thi Diem, and Bui Thi Xuan²⁴ (Marr 1976); Singapore had the community-founding matriarch Yang Meleking (Wee 1987); and "the traditionally high status of women" in the Southeast Asian region's past, particularly before colonization, is frequently cited. (Shahani 1975).²⁵

However partial or interstitial such efforts, the fundamentally oppositional relations between the interests of the state and those of feminism in the contemporary Third World makes dangerous the total abandonment of nationalist discourse, of any variety, to the exclusive monopoly of the state. In Singapore, the state's successful combination of nationalist discourse—in particular, the discourse of national survival and of approved forms of political participation—together with a formidable array of instrumentalities and apparatuses of power at the state's disposal, has determined the very nature and horizon of possibility for feminist activism.

In May 1987, twenty-two persons were arrested by the Singapore government under the powers granted by the Internal Security Act, as part of a putative "Marxist conspiracy" ostensibly threatening the state and national interests. Among the political prisoners were two founder-members of the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE), a vigorous feminist organization then practicing critique and activism on a variety of fronts.

A number of other founder-members were convinced that they had themselves either narrowly escaped detention, or were yet vulnerable to arbitrary seizure. The government immediately disseminated propaganda justifying the arrests and proceeded to ban or dismantle community activist groups it identified as Marxist- or left-oriented. Shocked, perhaps, into a sense of immediate vulnerability, or possibly convinced of a threat to its legitimacy and survival, AWARE was silent on the arrests, took no stand on the political prisoners, and issued no statements on its imprisoned founder-members. The two women, with the other prisoners, were detained without trial and subjected to physical and psychological abuse. One of them was subsequently rehabilitated, and released after a public confession and renunciation of politics; the other eventually fled to self-exile in the United Kingdom.²⁶

The arrest of its founder-members proved to be a watershed in the self-defined role and activism of AWARE. Created in December 1985 by a group of feminist women whose political opinions ranged from ideological left to liberal center, AWARE, unlike other women's groups in Singapore, had a reputation for being confrontational and critical, its politics "vociferous." In recent years, however, AWARE's public profile has quietly altered, and the organization has come to emphasize community and welfare services to women, rather than critique. Its current commitments include a scheme for loans to women "to prevent women from falling into the hands of loan sharks" (Chau 1992), and a telephone "Helpline" that women can call for advice and counseling on a range of problems, including "marital difficulties," "issues such as male-female relationships," "family sexuality, mental health problems, violence against women, work-related issues and medical matters" (AWARE round-up 1993, 39). In 1992, its executive director was quoted as saying that "the association's main emphasis now is research" ("Winning by Persuasion" 1993), and AWARE's president in 1992–93 was quoted in a women's fashion magazine as saying that she preferred the term "woman centredness" to describe her commitment, rather than the term "feminism," because "feminism is a lonely cause. You are always met with disagreement and disfavour."²⁷

Whatever the organization's self-definition today, the work that AWARE undertakes is excellent feminist work in the context of Singapore society. Many of the organization's projects are identifiably if quietly feminist: its Helpline is a version of a battered-women's emergency hotline; it organizes reading and discussion sessions for children on gender roles, workshops for women on a variety of subjects, support groups, free legal consultation sessions, and a reading circle and film nights to discuss women's issues. AWARE's research projects and publications target women in the workplace and childcare facilities, information-gathering on women and health, child education and gender socialization issues, and the generation of feminist literary and discursive materials. In reporting on the organization's cur-

rent projects, AWARE's mailings to members disclose that the organization works for social change by appealing to, negotiating with, and petitioning various government bodies invisibly, behind the scenes.

That is to say: AWARE's varied activities share the common factor of emphasizing service, information, and support, while avoiding analysis and engagement of a directly and stringently political kind. In particular, the organization avoids engagement with subjects that would be deemed sensitive or suspect by the Singapore government. These would include all issues of race, class, ethnicity, and sexual preference; the identification of structural and systemic, rather than contingent, inequities in society; the analysis of state apparatuses of power in the lives of Singapore women; and, indeed, government policies and positions on controversial issues of national importance, including a national population policy thinly premised on a form of social eugenics (Heng and Devan 1992). In the voiding of controversy, then, AWARE in effect requires itself to practice a form of feminism that is ironically evacuated of political content. It is a feminism, moreover, that must of necessity disengage itself from all recognition of difference, all social fronts, beyond the single focal point of gender; a feminism that must look past race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality; ignore the operations of ideology, of transnational collusions, and of technologies and instrumentalities of power; and blind itself to the controlling and manipulative force of state institutions; a feminism that must, in short, bracket off and put aside the varied discursivities, categories of difference, and totalizing institutions that crisscross and intersect with gender in the real world.

Indeed, Article 23 (c) of the constitution of AWARE, in compliance with legislation governing the formation and activities of societies in Singapore, explicitly prohibits the organization from involvement in the political: "The Society shall not indulge in any political activity or allow its funds and/or premises to be used for political purposes."²⁸ Implicit in this formulation is the understanding that what constitutes "political activity," and what defines a purpose as "political," will, in the context of Singapore—given the history of the Singapore government's use of its powers for political detention—be decided upon contingently, from moment to moment, by the state as it sees fit.²⁹

Despite the carefully noncritical face of feminism in Singapore, however, the PAP moved to establish a Women's Wing within its own party in 1989, ostensibly in order to "help raise public awareness about women's issues"—some fourteen years after the PAP's Women's Affairs Bureau had become defunct. The move, in effect, added the Party's presence to the extant women's groups in Singapore, a presence through which the Party apparently hoped to wrest the initiative and ground—as well as public attention—on women's issues. Sensing a potential risk in the divergence of feminist interests from state interests, even in the light of the peaceable activities

among women's groups in Singapore, the government moved to co-opt organizational energies nationally, by constituting, as before, a feminist group of sorts under its own party banner.³⁰ Unlike the fiery manifesto of 1959, however, the PAP's public statement on the Wing details, in no uncertain terms, the subordination of the Wing's semifeminist interests to the party and party-defined national interests. "The Wing," the Party declared, rather than constituting "a women's lobby group" or "pressure group," would instead "help Singaporean women become better informed about national issues." Chief among its charges would be the duty of "familiarizing members with the PAP philosophy, the role of women in politics, the national budget, health and other issues" ("PAP's Women's Wing" 1992). The year after its inception, the Wing was assigned by the PAP leadership "the task of looking into a proposal to set up a family services centre to coordinate welfare programmes for the needy" ("Women's Wing to Study" 1990); in 1993, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, responding to a suggestion that a Women's Affairs Bureau be reestablished in the Party, remarked that such a bureau, if formed, "should not confine itself to tackling 'women's problems.' Instead, it would have to address family and social problems as well" ("Worrying Trends" 1993). The Party today continues to assign a rag-bag of duties and tasks to its Women's Wing, most of which, true to the received notions established by the Women's Charter, of what constitutes women's concerns and issues, concentrates on the provision of service to others, notably children, families, and the poor.

In June 1993, two books commissioned by the Women's Wing, addressing the status of women in Singapore, were publicly launched. The texts, one academic and the other popular, offer the most feminist of the Wing's articulated positions on women in Singapore, and perhaps express the extent of what might be hoped for from a government-authorized, state-managed, and party-directed "women's movement" in the Third World. A newspaper article, reporting on the books' contents, mistily notes: "Realities of gender differences are implicitly acknowledged, there is pride in past achievements, hope in looking ahead and a gentle prodding for more attention to be paid to the inequalities and challenges that remain" ("Story of the Singapore Woman" 1993). For all the misty hopefulness palpable in the equating of "inequalities" with "challenges," however, the launching of the books was used, with brutal irony, as an occasion for the current Prime Minister of Singapore to reiterate the accusations directed against women by his predecessor ten years before. Highly educated women, Prime Minister Goh noted pointedly, were still not reproducing babies at a rate adequate to the maintenance of class elites. This, he implied, was a women's issue of the utmost urgency.³¹ Without any apparent consciousness of insult or irony, or even condescension, the Prime Minister went on to close the issue of gender inequalities in Singapore: "While some differences remained

in the way men and women were treated, such as in the country's immigration laws, these were products of the largely patriarchal society here and would have to be accepted, he said" ("Worrying Trends" 1993).³²

The PAP's attempt to coopt feminism to subserve the party's political purposes, state legislation prohibiting registered organizations from activity that might be construed as "political," even the arrest of individual feminists under the Internal Security Act in Singapore—all these events inscribe relatively dulcet moments in the history and fortunes of Third-World feminism. Saskia Wieringa, charting the history of the Indonesian left-feminist organization Gerakan Wanita Indonesia (or GERWANI), a movement whose membership in 1965 comprised 1.5 million people, records the starkest possible fate for institutional feminism in the Third World when she details the organization's destruction by the Indonesian military government, and the torture, brutalization, and demonization of GERWANI women. Indeed, the array of hazards confronting feminism in the Third World is instructive. Because of the vast instrumentalities that range from preventive or punitive legislation to military or police intervention—and because an institutionalized feminist movement draws attention to itself and appears to the state to possess a capacity, incipient or actual, for the exertion of pressure on national political culture—successful forms of feminism in the Third World have sometimes been informal, unobtrusive, small-scale feminisms.³³ Feminist scholars observe that some of the most effective feminist groups in Southeast Asia—effective in the constituencies of women they reach, their commitment to critical and transformative work, and their empowerment of women at the grassroots level—are often not even registered organizations as such (Heyzer 1986). Many are simply "small groups of women, made up frequently of trusted friends," though these groups may be "more or less aware of one another" and may "exist within networks" (128). Organizing women in poor communities, rural villages, plantations, or city squatter areas in Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand, these feminists work with local women in order ultimately to "phase themselves out of . . . leadership positions as the local women become more confident" (128). In a different locality of the Third World, Peruvian feminists have concluded that, as Saskia Wieringa notes, "it is not necessary to join in a large-scale movement . . . you can work in a much more fruitful way in small autonomous groups" (Wieringa 1988).

The relative safety or success of small-scale feminist activism in the Third World should not, however, be overemphasized. In Singapore, from 1982 to 1987, guerilla feminisms of precisely this nature existed: informal collectivities of women supported and aided domestic workers abused by employers, offered legal services in working-class districts to prostitutes and disenfranchised others, conducted social analysis and critique through community theater and drama, met to discuss, educate, critique and transform on a

variety of fronts. In many ways, the organization which became AWARE was forged in that critical matrix of repeated, issue-specific, local interventions. Nevertheless, this feminist network of small groups was inexorably dismantled when the Singapore government banned a number of community networks in 1987, in the name of an alleged plot against the state.

No variety of feminism in the Third World, then, is secure from the intervention of the state, nor from the power of any who are able to wield the discourse of nationalism with unchallenged authority. The history of feminism in Singapore, as elsewhere, has been instructive. Rights historically granted to women by patriarchal authority in order to accomplish nationalist goals and agendas do not necessarily constitute acts of feminism, though as practices of power, the granting of such rights may function, both initially and today, to the very real advantage of women. In contrast, rights seized upon and practices initiated by women in the pursuit of their imagined collective interest, even if—like the work of AWARE and others—such practices and acts seem only uncomfortably or unfamiliarly to fit received descriptions of feminism, are indisputably feminist practices. For in Third-World states, ultimately, all feminisms are at risk; all must write their own scripts and plot their continuing survival from moment to moment. It is a profound tribute to feminist resourcefulness and tenacity that varieties of feminism continue to survive and proliferate in the multiple localities of the Third World today.³⁴

Thinking Gender
Edited by Linda Nicholson

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Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures

Edited by
M. Jacqui Alexander
and
Chandra Talpade Mohanty

Routledge
New York and London

Published in 1997 by
Routledge
29 West 35th Street
New York, NY 10001

Published in Great Britain by
Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane
London EC4P 4EE

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Feminist genealogies, colonial legacies, democratic futures / edited by M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-415-91211-3 (cloth). — ISBN 0-415-91212-1 (pbk.)

1. Feminism—Developing countries. 2. Women—Developing countries—Social conditions. I. Alexander, M. Jacqui. II. Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, 1955–.

HQ1870.9.F45 1995

305.42'09172'4—dc20

95-36341

CIP

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